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## Payday: THE Robbery



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### Chapter 1 by Watchdog

"Never thought I'd say this, but Christ Jesus, am I happy bulldozer armor got upgraded."

Hoxton stared at Chains as if he had lost his mind. It was possible, after the nightmare dash to the escape van with two human tanks hot on their heels. It was bad enough that the bank hit had gone loud, but even their escape had ended in disaster. A desperate turn to avoid a blockade threw them into a parking garage, where the van careened into a wall and spilled them out into gunfire and smoke.

Hoxton considered himself a good sprinter and even he was lightheaded after legging it up several sets of stairs to Bain's backup escape. Wolf had thrown himself on the floor of the van and hadn't moved, pinned under his own loot bag. Dallas was coughing and hacking like the champion chain smoker he had been since the eighth grade.

Dallas surprised him by nodding in agreement with Chains. "Would be...dead," he rasped, obviously not up to full sentences yet.

"They used to run!" Wolf flipped onto his side, looking like a sad turtle with the bag of gold still slung on his back. The movement sent him sprawling on his back, because he left his face mostly slumped into the floor. "Oh, that was nothing scary, then running into a bulldozer when you could feel a hole in the armor!"

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"Nothing scarier? I think you're a little too used to being able to hear cloakers coming." Chains leaned back, pushing his mask away from his face. The adrenaline was draining now, and Hoxton did the same. Dallas had taken a water bottle from an overheard compartment and was guzzling it like a man fresh out of the desert. "I remember you used to grenade every smoke bomb you saw."

Wolf groaned. "I've been doing better!"

"Remember that time Dallas put a green night-light in the bathroom and you emptied your gun into the wall?"

"Augh! Dra åt helvete!" Wolf tugged the lootbag over his own head as if he were a kid hiding under the covers as Chains chuckled at him.

"So, wait," Hoxton interrupted. "You couldn't hear cloakers over the radio? How did you know they were coming?"

Chains shuddered. "You didn't."

"Shoot everything," was Wolf's muffled advice. Stories of his itchy trigger finger were suddenly making sense to Hoxton.

"It was hard, some days." Dallas was finally collecting himself, peeling off his jacket and slicking back his sweaty hair. His mask was on the bench next to him, and he was pulling his medkit into his lap. Out of habit? In spite of everything going to shit, the gang was mostly unscathed; at least, Hoxton thought so. He hadn't looked back over his shoulder since he'd seen the hulking bomb disposal suit rounding the corner, but nobody was drenched in blood and everyone had reached the van under their own power. A win, in his book.

"Some of the jobs were bigger. Riskier, too. It never used to happen that we could get in and out of a place in under five minutes, or without firing a shot."

"But we didn't have to knock over convenience stores, either," said Chains, rolling his eyes.

"Things were different," Dallas said softly, and Hoxton knew he was talking about the cops any more. His hazel eyes were on the door, and he was holding his gun in his hands. Wolf curled

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up a little tighter at the quiet remark, and the atmosphere in the van became heavy and uncomfortable.

Chains broke the spell by jabbing Dallas in the ribs with his elbow.

"And you used to run better, too." His brother recovered with a huff and a glare.

"I run just fine, Mr. One-Minute-Mile. I wasn't the one pulling up the rear. Speaking of which," Dallas poked Wolf in the thigh with the heel of his foot. "Don't think I don't know what you're trying with that bag, I heard him clip you. Jacket off."

Hoxton had no idea what Dallas was talking about, but Wolf flinched guiltily.

"He didn't pop the vest!"

Dallas rolled up his sleeves and loosened his tie. "You have eyes in the back of your head now? Jacket off."

"Nothing's bleeding, can't it wait until the safehouse? It's so cramped in here..."

Dallas paused, and fixed Wolf with the exact same unimpressed look that Hoxton had once received for calling a jar of peanut butter dinner at age eleven.

Wolf heaved a sigh and snatched off his mask before slowly working to take the lootbag off his back, and now that Hoxton was looking for it he could see how Wolf was working to avoid moving his shoulders. Hoxton took pity on him and grabbed the straps, but Wolf, not expecting his help, jolted in the other direction and barely smothered a pained whine.

They glared at each other.

"Just take it off and get it over with," snapped Hoxton, crossing his arms. The one time he felt like actually helping Wolf, and the idiot couldn't sit still for it. He found himself in the unusual position of supporting Dallas's smothering overprotection if it meant getting the awkward mess over with more quickly.

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Dallas pushed his fingers through the holes of the discarded coat with a disapproving look; obviously, it wasn't worth repairing. He tossed it to the side and worked the light ballistic vest off, then pushed up Wolf's shirt, where there were already red and purple welts growing across the center of his back.

"I told you the vest was fine," sulked Wolf when Dallas finally pronounced him not bleeding.

"It almost wasn't," Dallas shot back, uncharacteristically harsh. "If you were two steps slower that would have put a hole in you, and we would have had to drop half the take to carry you back to the van." Wolf jerked away, biting his lip.

Hoxton almost always preferred lighter armor, and was about to speak up in defense of it (defending the ballistic vest, not Wolf, although it was strange of Dallas to be so unforgiving of regular old bad luck) when Chains brushed his arm. He met his eyes with a barely perceptible shake of the head.

"Come running with me and Dallas in the mornings," said Chains loudly, nudging Wolf's shoulder with his knee. "Chains has been letting you slide 'cause you look so cute with that donkey, but cute doesn't stop bulldozers."

Wolf's ears were red at the mention of the stuffed animal someone (definitely not Hoxton) shoved into his arms every time he took a nap on the couch. He looked grudging in spite of the light-hearted teasing, and Chains turned to Dallas. "We got out in one piece, chief. We can make better money next time."

Dallas's jaw tightened; he was barely cutting himself off from saying something, but Chains touched his arm and Dallas's hands slowly relaxed. He leaned back, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

"Be more careful, Wolf."

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Be more careful. Like that ever worked.

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